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ABSTRACT

Efforts have been made by the Cornell University Libraries (New York) reference staff to assist students with their library research for a popular undergraduate course in human sexuality. Librarians have found the course to be a serious problem for both their reference and stack collections as most students do not understand research strategy, tend to leave their assignment (a short research paper) until the last minute, and are nearly all looking for the same materials at the same time. In 1981, the second year the course was offered, a voluntary library session was offered. By 1985, approximately 10 mandatory library sessions were included. In 1987, the library was awarded a $10,000 grant which enabled the reference staff to focus on improving the library-course connection. The major changes were the assignment of a critical, annotated bibliography on the research topic rather than a short research paper, and an earlier due date for the assignment. Student reactions to the assignment were positive, grades for the class improved over previous semesters, and librarians reported few problems with student research. (MES)

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Making Real Changes: Course Integrated Instruction and Its Impact, a Case Study

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One of the most popular courses on the Cornell campus is Professor Andrea Parrot's Human Service Studies 315: Issues in Human Sexuality. The course is taught in the fall and spring terms and generally has an enrollment of 400 students. It is taught in an abbreviated version in the summer, but even then enrolls a large number of students. Librarians in several of the campus libraries have found the course to be a serious problem for both their reference and stack collections as the students enrolled in it rarely understand research strategy, tend to leave their assignment (a short research paper) to the last minute, and are nearly all looking for the same materials at exactly the same time. Because the course is popular with whole groups of students (e.g. it is often taken by the entire basketball team or an entire fraternity), Professor Parrot, to prevent plagiarism and the use of old papers, requires that her students use current material. She also changes topics nearly every term. A grant from the President's office has enabled Cornell librarians to be involved more directly in the assignment for the course; an involvement that has helped to change the research behavior of its students.

In 1980 Professor Andrea Parrot, a new member of the Department of Human Service Studies, began teaching a course entitled HSS 315: Issues in Human Sexuality. Ordinarily a new course being taught on our campus does not make itself felt immediately; sometimes hardly at all. In this case, however, probably in part due to the subject matter and in part to the exceptional vitality and speaking skills of the professor, enrollment in the class was large from the very beginning. By the end of that first semester almost every reference librarian at Cornell had encountered at least some of the students from this class. They had appeared on the library scene all semester long, but descended en masse during the last week or two of school, all needing exactly the same materials, and nearly all researching the same topics.

Acting as spokesperson for the librarians, I approached Professor Parrot sometime in 1981 and convinced her to let me speak to her students on a voluntary basis--that is, students could come to a library session if they wished. Professor Parrot did not yet fully appreciate the importance of such a session so there was need at that time to keep our approach gentle and low key. Over the next few years Professor Parrot worked more and more cooperatively with the librarians,

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eventually making the library session a mandatory part of her course.

By 1985 we were teaching approximately ten bibliographic instruction sections per semester to the students in this class. We had also convinced Professor Parrot to allow her students to choose a somewhat broader series of topics, helping, in fact, to find new and exciting topics which we would send to her for approval. However, despite our efforts there was still too much competition for the same materials, resulting in pages ripped out of journals and books missing from shelves for long periods of time. The fact that the assignment also required that all material come from the latest year or two and that "scholarly" sources were required, added to the frustration level of both students and librarians. We could sympathize with Professor Parrot's concerns about plagiarism and the use of fraternity paper files, but felt that there must be a better way to tackle the problem. It seemed to some of the librarians that the solution might lie in still more varied paper topics as well as in the broadening of the time span from which articles could be drawn. However, one of the major difficulties in resolving the relationship between the course and the libraries was due, in part at least, to our added responsibilities of computer searching, bibliography preparation and an ever-increasing instruction load. All of these activities had cut down on the amount of time available to work out an intensive and truly cooperative relationship with many of the instructors whose students we were trying to help.

The announcement in 1987 of the Cornell President's Initiative Grants for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education seemed like manna from heaven to many of us. We felt that we had the perfect situation to merit a grant: a professor who supported our efforts and a very large number of undergraduates whose behavior we would be affecting. We were also fortunate in having a library director who believed that librarians do have a role in undergraduate education. Here was an opportunity to apply for money which could provide us with some extra staffing and the potential to work through this problem to a satisfactory solution. On the other hand, the competition for these grants was fierce; faculty from most departments on campus were planning to apply. Would we as librarians have a chance? With nothing to lose we decided to give it a go, and much to our delight when the final announcements were made, the Uris Undergraduate Library was awarded a $10,000.00 grant which was to be matched, in part, by library funds, and used over the next three years. Although it was a third of what we had originally applied for we felt fortunate in getting it as the number of grants applied for exceeded the number of grants actually awarded by more than four to one.

This money enabled us to hire a part time librarian to fill in for me at the reference desk while I spent those hours working through a new research methodology with Professor Parrot and her class. Since December, 1987 Andrea Parrot and I have met together numerous times to discuss ways in which the library-course connection could be improved. During the spring semester (1988) librarians in the Undergraduate Library presented the usual ten library sessions they have presented in the past, but the changes made in the assignments connected with those sessions have made critical changes in the way students are using the library and in the quality of the papers they are producing.

The first major change had to do with when the paper research was being done. We in the libraries had long felt that one of the biggest problems with the assignment had to do with the time of the semester at which it was due. By having the paper deadline during the last week of the semester, Professor Parrot had ensured that her students would compete not only with each other but with students from numerous other courses as well--since final-week deadlines are popular with any number of faculty. I suggested to her that the research paper required for the course could be improved if it were preceded by the assignment, earlier in the semester, of a critical, annotated bibliography. The objectives of such an assignment were: to allow students to examine carefully and critically the written materials available on a given subject; to enable students to increase their knowledge about and efficiency in using the services and resources of a major university library; to increase student expertise in one of the areas covered by the course and to encourage students to look for materials early in the semester when competition for them was not as great. In addition, such an assignment would allow students time to obtain materials through interlibrary loan if necessary, and would give them a chance to improve on the resources they found if those did not meet the standards established by the professor.

What the details of this assignment would be and how the librarians would be involved in it were critical issues that the professor and I worked out together. She was eager to have us continue to teach her students about library resources, but saw a need to broaden the content of our sessions to include instruction in bibliographic format. (She requires students to use the American Psychological Association's publication guidelines). I was eager to prepare materials that would help students distinguish between scholarly and non-scholarly journals since their inability to do so had been a problem in the past. We planned that students would leave the library session with a clear idea of what was meant by the term "critical annotation" and how to write one, and of what parts a bibliographic citation should consist.

How the assignment would be announced and the manner in which it would be turned in to the instructor were also part of our deliberations. Professor Parrot decided that she would like the librarians to present the annotated bibliography assignment as part of the library session. We were also to describe not only the format of the assignment, but its various parts; an introductory essay (describing briefly how the student had done his/her research), the annotated bibliography (she asked for no fewer than six items, of which three must be scholarly), and a thesis statement based on what the student had learned from reading the materials gathered for the bibliography. This last requirement also meant that the librarians would teach students what a thesis statement is and does and how to write one. The due date for this assignment was mid-semester. The bibliography would constitute approximately one-fifth of the paper grade. Any student failing to achieve a passing mark on the bibliography would be required to do it over before being allowed to turn in the final paper. To assure that the materials used in the bibliography would be available for perusal at the time the final papers were due, students were encouraged to photocopy as much of the material they examined as possible.

Professor Parrot was convinced that by grading the bibliographies the teaching assistants would have a better sense of the final papers, although there was some feeling on their part that the librarians, having given the assignment should also grade it. For one thing, neither the professor nor the teaching assistants felt qualified to judge the bibliographies in the same manner that a librarian would. I was asked to teach them how. Meeting with the professor and the four teaching assistants I worked out some general guidelines to follow. Together we graded a number of the completed bibliographies, taking into account the quality and appropriateness of the sources, details of the introduction, the ability to write clear and critical annotations and a good thesis statement, and finally, the accuracy of format. Errors of grammar, punctuation and spelling were corrected, but unless they intruded on the meaning of a sentence such errors did not cause students to lose points.

How did the students feel about the assignment? Since I agreed to grade one-sixth of the total number of papers I think I have a reasonably good understanding of the students' reactions. Of the nearly 70 papers I graded all but one contained some positive statement about this experience. Comments such as "I finally feel as though I've learned how to use the libraries" or "this was the first time I had ever tried to use something other than the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature to find an article, " or, "this was one of the most useful assignments I've had since coming to Cornell" were very gratifying. The one negative statement

came from a senior who felt that it was an "insult" to have to do this assignment since he already knew "all there was to know" about doing research. (He actually did a rather poor job on his bibliography, so I didn't take his comment too much to heart).

And the librarians? Now that the semester is over and we've had a chance to talk about the impact of the assignment on the libraries we find that we have a lot to be pleased about. The 400 students from HSS 315 who usually appear at our desk in a panic during the last weeks of the term just didn't materialize this year. They had all done their research early in the semester and when everyone else was hunting down resources they were busy writing their final paper. We also had far fewer reports of articles ripped out of journals.

Professor Parrot also feels that the assignment was worthwhile. The average grade for the course was up 1.75 points over any previous semester and whereas in previous semesters she and her teaching assistants have had to cope with numerous complaints about grades, this term there were only two. Perhaps most important of all, there were no cases of plagiarism. In fact, the professor has decided to extend this assignment to HSS 101: Issues in Human Services Delivery, a course with an enrollment of 150 students which she teaches every fall.

We have two more years of our Initiatives grant. Can we continue this program once the grant has run out? We think so. Now that the basic materials have been produced, the professor and teaching assistants have been trained in grading an annotated bibliography, and everyone involved is convinced of the value of the assignment, we think it should be reasonably simple to keep our materials updated and our contacts with the course ongoing. We look forward to refining our lectures and handouts and perhaps the assignment itself, but feel that the integration of bibliographic instruction with this course has been a true success.